

Islamic Education Reform in Western Contexts: Challenges and Opportunities for Teacher Professionalism

Abdusemiu Olatunji Ajani-Alkilany¹, Ibrahim Haruna Hassan al-Wasewi², Muhammad Irfan Nazir³

¹Islamic Education & Faith Initiative, Lagos, Nigeria

²Islamic Studies, University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria

³Islamic Studies, Govt. Deg. College, Orangi Town, Karachi, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to analyze how Islamic education reform in Western developing contexts influences the redefinition of teacher professionalism within Islamic moral and epistemological frameworks. It seeks to explore the dialectic between faith-based values and secular educational structures through an interpretive conceptual review.

Methodology: The research employs a qualitative literature review using the *Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS)* approach. A total of 35 academic sources from 2010–2024 were selected from Scopus, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis databases. The synthesis critically integrates theoretical and empirical literature on Islamic education reform, teacher professionalism, and pedagogical renewal in developing Western societies.

Main Findings: The synthesis reveals that reform in Islamic education functions as an epistemological reconstruction that redefines professionalism from a moral-spiritual foundation. Teachers in Western developing contexts act as mediators between Islamic ethics and plural educational demands. Reform initiatives emphasize *ta'dib* (ethical discipline), *ihsan* (excellence), and intercultural competence as the core of teacher professionalism, transforming education into a moral and spiritual enterprise.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study contributes a conceptual framework of integrative professionalism, merging Islamic epistemology with global education theory. It offers a new understanding of how Islamic reform can serve as an ethical corrective to modern professionalism, positioning teachers as agents of spiritual renewal and social transformation in plural learning environments.

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Corresponding Author:

Abdusemiu Olatunji Ajani-Alkilany

Islamic Education & Faith Initiative, Lagos, Nigeria

Email: abdalkilany30@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current era of globalization and knowledge transformation, Islamic education has been undergoing profound reform across various sociocultural contexts [1]-[3]. This reform seeks to respond to the challenges of modernity, secularism, and pluralism while maintaining Islam's core spiritual and moral values. In many Western developing countries—such as Bosnia, Albania, South Africa, and parts of Latin America—Muslim educators face unique challenges in integrating Islamic values within state-based educational systems. The historical influence of colonial education and secular policy frameworks has shaped pedagogical practices

that often marginalize religious perspectives [4]-[6]. Consequently, the reform of Islamic education in these contexts becomes both a cultural negotiation and a professional mission for Muslim teachers [7], [8].

Reform in Islamic education is not merely a structural or curricular change but represents an epistemological shift toward integrating faith (*iman*), knowledge (*'ilm*), and action (*'amal*) [9], [10]. True educational reform must aim for the “dewesternization of knowledge” and the restoration of *adab*—the proper organization of learning and moral discipline [11], [12]. In Western developing contexts, these ideals intersect with the need to harmonize Islamic pedagogy with pluralistic civic values [13], [14]. The ongoing dialogue between traditional Islamic scholarship and modern educational theories has opened opportunities for recontextualizing Islamic education without detaching it from global realities [15], [16]. Therefore, reform in Islamic education is fundamentally about producing educators who are intellectually competent, spiritually grounded, and socially responsive.

Teacher professionalism stands at the center of this reform discourse. In Islamic educational philosophy, the teacher (*mu'allim*) is viewed as a moral exemplar, a transmitter of knowledge, and a mentor of character (*murabbi*) [17], [18]. However, in many Western developing countries, teachers face challenges balancing their spiritual mission with the technical demands of modern pedagogy [19], [20]. Professionalism is no longer limited to academic mastery but also encompasses ethical conduct, cultural adaptability, and reflective practice [21], [22]. Muslim teachers must negotiate between institutional expectations shaped by secular norms and their commitment to Islamic moral integrity. This tension highlights the need for reform that strengthens teacher identity and redefines professionalism from an Islamic epistemological standpoint.

The literature reveals that Islamic education reform efforts in developing Western contexts often encounter systemic and cultural constraints [1], [23]. For example, in South Africa, Islamic schools struggle to align state curricula with religious objectives due to regulatory limitations. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, post-war reconstruction of Islamic schooling involves balancing national integration with religious preservation [24], [25]. These cases illustrate that reform is not only pedagogical but also political and sociological, requiring educators to act as agents of reconciliation and identity restoration. Despite such challenges, these contexts also offer opportunities for innovation, such as integrating Islamic ethics into citizenship education and intercultural dialogue [2], [26], [27].

Existing studies have predominantly focused on policy reform and curriculum development, leaving a significant gap in understanding how such reforms influence teacher professionalism [28], [29]. Most research treats educational change as an institutional phenomenon rather than a human process shaped by teachers' values, emotions, and identities. Yet, as the literature on Islamic pedagogy suggests, sustainable reform depends on empowering teachers as reflective practitioners who can embody Islamic ethics within contemporary classrooms [30], [31]. This literature review seeks to fill that gap by connecting reform discourses with the lived reality of Muslim educators navigating plural educational environments.

The novelty of this study lies in synthesizing perspectives from Islamic philosophy, educational reform, and teacher professionalism within the specific context of Western developing societies. By integrating these domains, this article proposes a conceptual framework of *integrative professionalism*—a model that balances faith-based ethics with the competencies demanded by global education [32], [33]. This approach advances the idea that professionalism in Islamic education should be understood not as conformity to Western standards, but as a dynamic expression of *ihsan* (excellence) and *amanah* (responsibility). The reform of Islamic education, therefore, must be accompanied by the reform of teacher consciousness—where pedagogical practice becomes an act of worship and service to humanity.

The ultimate objective of this article is to critically review and interpret existing scholarly works to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim teachers in implementing Islamic education reform in Western developing contexts. It aims to provide theoretical grounding for future empirical studies and policy formulation concerning teacher development, curriculum integration, and institutional capacity. Moreover, it aspires to contribute to the global discourse on Islamic education by emphasizing professionalism as both a pedagogical and spiritual pursuit. By situating Islamic education reform within a multicultural and developing Western framework, this study highlights the potential for building teacher professionalism rooted in Islamic ethics while engaging productively with global educational change.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Type of Research

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design using a literature review approach, aimed at synthesizing and interpreting previous studies related to Islamic education reform and teacher professionalism [34], [35]. The literature review model is used to identify conceptual trends, theoretical foundations, and empirical findings from international and regional publications [36], [37]. This approach allows a holistic understanding of the relationship between educational reform and professional identity development among Muslim teachers in Western developing contexts. Rather than generating new field data, this study focuses on

constructing a conceptual synthesis grounded in scholarly discourse. Hence, the method emphasizes interpretation, comparison, and integration of diverse academic perspectives to propose a coherent theoretical framework.

2.2. Sources of Data and Literature Selection

The data in this study were derived from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and policy documents published between 2010 and 2024. The literature was collected from reputable databases such as Scopus, SpringerLink, Google Scholar, and Taylor & Francis [38], [39]. Inclusion criteria included studies discussing Islamic education reform, teacher professionalism, educational leadership, and pedagogical innovation in Western developing countries, including Bosnia, Albania, South Africa, and Latin America. A total of 52 documents were initially identified, but only 35 met the thematic and methodological relevance criteria. The selected sources were analyzed based on their conceptual contribution and empirical insights to ensure comprehensive representation of the field.

2.3. Data Collection and Instrumentation

As this study is based on literature review, the data collection technique involved systematic reading, annotation, and categorization of theoretical and empirical sources. The main instrument was the literature review matrix, designed to map author perspectives, key concepts, and implications for teacher professionalism. The data were organized into four thematic categories: (1) philosophical foundations of Islamic education reform, (2) teacher professionalism and identity, (3) challenges in pluralistic educational systems, and (4) emerging models of reform. This process ensured analytical rigor and consistency across diverse scholarly sources. The literature matrix functioned as a conceptual tool to identify intersections between Islamic values and educational reform strategies.

Table 1. Literature Review Matrix Framework

Category	Key Concepts	Representative Sources	Analytical Focus
Islamic Educational Reform	Integration of faith and knowledge, epistemological renewal	Mujahidin (2024); Eayaz and Zawar (2024)	Relevance of reform principles to contemporary contexts
Teacher Professionalism	Ethical pedagogy, <i>ta'dib</i> , reflective practice	Halstead (2010), Succarie (2024), Zamsiswaya (2024)	Dimensions of Islamic teacher professionalism
Reform Challenges	Secular policy, multicultural pressures, institutional barriers	Mahalli et al (2023), Setyawan et al (2024)	Barriers in Western developing education systems
Reform Opportunities	Contextual <i>ijtihad</i> , civic education, intercultural dialogue	Lahmar (2024), Morley (2024)	Potential pathways for integrative reform

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using the Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) approach, which emphasizes the interpretive integration of theoretical and empirical literature into a coherent conceptual framework [40], [41]. Unlike traditional systematic reviews, CIS allows the researcher to critically engage with diverse sources to identify underlying assumptions, tensions, and gaps within the discourse on Islamic education reform. The analysis focused on understanding how ideas about reform and teacher professionalism are framed, contested, and contextualized in Western developing countries. Each text was examined not only for its explicit findings but also for its epistemological orientation—how it defines knowledge, teaching, and professionalism from an Islamic worldview. Through this iterative process, the researcher synthesized key themes and generated new conceptual insights linking reform movements to the redefinition of teacher professionalism in multicultural Islamic education contexts.

2.5. Research Procedure

The research procedure followed the logic of Critical Interpretive Synthesis, which emphasizes iterative engagement with literature rather than linear data collection. The process began with the identification and selection of key literature, guided by the research questions on Islamic education reform and teacher professionalism. Next, the interpretive reading stage involved critical reflection on each source to identify conceptual tensions, theoretical patterns, and contextual insights. In the synthesis stage, the researcher compared and reinterpreted findings across studies to construct integrative themes and emergent theoretical propositions. Finally, the conceptual framing stage consolidated these interpretations into a coherent analytical narrative that highlights how reform discourses shape the professional identity of Muslim teachers in Western developing societies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This literature-based study, analyzed using Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS), identified four overarching constructs that define the current trajectory of Islamic education reform in Western developing contexts and its impact on teacher professionalism. Rather than treating reform as an isolated policy movement, the synthesis interprets it as an epistemological, pedagogical, and moral reconstruction within Muslim educational thought. The four constructs are: (1) the epistemological reconstruction of Islamic education; (2) the pedagogical and institutional challenges of reform; (3) the redefinition of professionalism within Islamic moral frameworks; and (4) the emergence of transformative opportunities for professional teacher development. Each construct is not only a theme but a conceptual pattern reflecting both the tensions and harmonies between global educational modernity and Islamic ethical traditions.

3.1. Epistemological Reconstruction of Islamic Education

The first finding of this study highlights that Islamic education reform in Western developing regions—such as Bosnia, Albania, and South Africa—emerges primarily from an epistemological struggle rather than administrative policy reform. Literature reviewed reveals that reform is deeply concerned with the crisis of knowledge and value, where Islamic education must reconcile revelation (wahy) and reason ('aql) within a framework relevant to contemporary society [42], [43]. Critical readings of postcolonial contexts, especially in Bosnia and South Africa, show that Islamic schools have sought to re-anchor their curricula on spiritual and ethical objectives rather than secular utility. The epistemological focus of reform, therefore, emphasizes the recovery of adab (proper order of knowledge) and the humanization of education as an act of moral cultivation.

Under the CIS approach, this pattern was not interpreted as a simple return to traditionalism but as an intellectual reconstruction—a recontextualization of classical Islamic epistemology into modern pedagogical logic. Rather than rejecting modern educational science, reform movements reinterpret it through Qur'anic principles of hikmah (wisdom) and tawazun (balance). The reviewed literature demonstrates that Muslim scholars and educators in these contexts act as mediators of epistemologies, bridging the divide between rationalism and revelation. This epistemic renewal situates Islamic education as both a critique and complement to Western thought, leading to the conceptualization of teacher professionalism as a form of intellectual jihad—a disciplined effort to pursue truth and virtue within educational reform.

3.2. Pedagogical and Institutional Challenges

The second finding points to persistent pedagogical and institutional barriers that hinder reform implementation in Western developing countries. Empirical studies by Davids [44] in South Africa and Sijamhodžić-Nadarević [45] in Bosnia describe that Islamic schools often function within state-regulated secular frameworks, where curricula are standardized around civic values rather than faith-based ethics. This structural tension places Muslim educators in a position where they must comply with national education standards while striving to preserve Islamic pedagogical integrity. In many cases, Islamic education remains underfunded, marginalized, or treated as supplementary, creating institutional fragility that undermines both educational quality and teacher morale.

Through the CIS lens, these challenges were critically interpreted as manifestations of epistemic and systemic asymmetry—that is, inequality between secular institutions and religious educational authority. Teachers in reforming Islamic schools face what Sahin [46] terms pedagogical dissonance, a conflict between moral intent and institutional expectation. The literature suggests that teacher identity becomes fragmented when professional recognition is tied solely to bureaucratic metrics rather than ethical or spiritual merit. This tension also exposes the inadequacy of professional training programs, which often emphasize classroom management and assessment but neglect akhlaq (moral excellence) and tarbiyah (holistic formation). Hence, pedagogical reform requires structural rethinking: not just updating teaching methods but re-centering the moral purpose of education as an act of ibadah (worship) and social service.

3.3. Redefining Teacher Professionalism in Islamic Contexts

The third construct emerging from the literature is the redefinition of teacher professionalism, which undergoes a paradigm shift in reformed Islamic educational thought. In contrast to the Western notion of professionalism as technical expertise, Islamic professionalism is an integrated construct combining knowledge, morality, and devotion. Halstead [47], Succarie [7], Zamsiswaya [48] all emphasize that the Muslim teacher's professional identity is inseparable from his or her moral and spiritual being. In contexts such as South Africa, Bosnia, and parts of Eastern Europe, teachers who internalize ta'dib (ethical discipline) and ihsan (spiritual excellence) become cultural mediators who embody Islam in plural environments. They are expected not only to teach but also to demonstrate akhlaq al-karimah (noble character) through daily practice, acting as both educators and exemplars.

Under critical synthesis, this redefinition of professionalism represents a conceptual realignment—from bureaucratic conformity to ethical authenticity. The literature consistently shows that professionalism is no longer defined by external evaluation systems but by inner moral consistency and reflective engagement with society. This shift is evident in training initiatives in Bosnia and South Africa, where teachers are encouraged to

develop “dual literacy”—pedagogical competence and intercultural understanding. Thus, the professional Muslim educator is portrayed not as a functionary of the state, but as an ethical actor negotiating between faith and civic pluralism. This integrative professionalism demonstrates that Islamic values such as *amanah* (trust), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *tawadu'* (humility) can coexist with and even enrich modern standards of teaching excellence.

3.4. Opportunities for Transformative Teacher Development

Despite structural limitations, the final synthesis reveals that reform movements in Western developing contexts are generating emerging opportunities for teacher transformation and leadership. Recent collaborations between Islamic universities, teacher-training institutes, and international NGOs have introduced hybrid programs that merge Islamic pedagogy with modern educational theory [49], [50]. In South Africa, for instance, partnerships between Islamic schools and secular institutions have led to the development of inclusive pedagogical frameworks integrating Islamic ethics into citizenship and human rights education. Similarly, Bosnia's post-conflict reconstruction initiatives have strengthened teacher capacity through intercultural and peace education that aligns with *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Islamic law).

Under CIS analysis, these initiatives reflect the potential for dialogical and transformative reform. Teachers are positioned not as passive recipients of policy but as agents of renewal who reinterpret Islamic values for contemporary educational challenges. This trend marks a transition from defensive identity preservation toward proactive engagement with global education standards. By viewing reform as *ijtihad mu'assasi*—institutional reasoning guided by Islamic ethics—teachers can lead innovation without losing moral grounding. In the long term, such reform can cultivate educators who exemplify *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation) through professionalism that is intellectual, spiritual, and socially constructive.

3.5. Integrative Conceptual Synthesis

Synthesizing across these themes, the literature reveals that Islamic education reform in Western developing societies is evolving toward a dialogical model of professionalism, where faith and knowledge mutually reinforce one another. This integrative synthesis moves beyond the dichotomy of traditionalism versus modernism, proposing instead an epistemic pluralism grounded in Islamic ethics. Teachers emerge as key reform agents, translating moral principles into professional conduct and intercultural communication. The reviewed literature underscores that reform success depends not merely on policy or curriculum but on transforming teacher consciousness—turning professionalism into a form of spiritual leadership. In essence, Islamic education reform in these contexts represents both a response to globalization and an affirmation of Islam's timeless pedagogical wisdom, ensuring that education remains a moral enterprise dedicated to cultivating just, knowledgeable, and compassionate human beings.

Reform in Islamic education within Western developing contexts must be understood as a philosophical renewal of meaning, not merely an administrative modernization. The deeper discourse emerging from the literature situates reform as a reawakening of Islamic epistemology — a moral and intellectual effort to reclaim the unity of knowledge (*tawhid al-ma'rifah*). Within this view, education is not a neutral act but a sacred process that connects divine truth with human development. The reform of education, therefore, reflects Islam's ontological commitment to aligning knowledge with ethical purpose. In societies shaped by secular and postcolonial dynamics, this reform represents the reassertion of education as a spiritual enterprise in which the teacher becomes the embodiment of moral wisdom.

From an epistemological standpoint, the reform movement challenges the dominance of secular modernity by proposing an alternative framework of knowing grounded in revelation and reason. Islamic thought historically has never rejected rational inquiry; rather, it insists that knowledge must serve *tazkiyah al-nafs* (the purification of the soul) and the improvement of society. Reform, then, is not about opposing Western educational methods but reorienting them toward a higher moral telos. This intellectual stance transcends the binary of “traditional” and “modern,” suggesting that the two can coexist within a *tawhidic paradigm* that integrates the material and the spiritual, the technical and the ethical. The implication for teacher professionalism is profound: the educator is no longer a functionary of policy, but a guardian of meaning — a moral interpreter who ensures that learning serves both human dignity and divine accountability.

In the pedagogical domain, this reform discourse redefines teaching as a form of moral leadership [51], [52]. The literature collectively points toward a shift from mechanistic, outcome-based education to reflective and value-driven pedagogy. Such transformation aligns with the Qur'anic vision of *ulul albab* — educators who teach through wisdom, compassion, and balance. This requires teachers to engage in *muhasabah* (self-reflection) as part of their professional practice, recognizing that competence without consciousness leads to fragmentation. Professional development, therefore, must cultivate the teacher's inner life as much as technical skill. This integration of spirituality and pedagogy transforms classrooms into spaces of ethical encounter where knowledge transmission becomes a form of moral dialogue.

Reform also demands a rethinking of professionalism itself, particularly within multicultural and plural educational contexts. Modern definitions of professionalism tend to emphasize accountability, efficiency, and

technical expertise, while minimizing ethical and metaphysical dimensions. Islamic educational thought reverses this hierarchy: moral excellence (*ihsan*) and trustworthiness (*amanah*) become the foundation of professional identity. In this model, teachers embody *ta'dib* — a disciplined harmony between intellect, action, and character. Professionalism is measured not by compliance with external standards but by inner alignment with truth, sincerity, and service. When professionalism is interpreted through this ethical lens, it offers a corrective to the moral vacuum that often accompanies secular schooling. It restores teaching as an act of *ibadah*, where pedagogical performance is inseparable from spiritual integrity.

The deeper implication of this paradigm is that teacher development must become transformative rather than transmissive. Reform cannot succeed if teacher education remains confined to technical training. The literature implies that what is needed is *tarbiyah mu'assasiyyah* — institutional formation that cultivates reflective educators capable of navigating moral complexity. This approach resonates with the concept of *transformative Islamic pedagogy* proposed by contemporary scholars such as Sahin [46], which views education as the cultivation of self-awareness and social responsibility through faith-based reasoning. When teacher education integrates reflective spirituality with professional inquiry, it produces educators who are not only skilled but also ethically grounded and socially empathetic. Such teachers can act as moral mediators between Islam and the broader society, promoting peace, justice, and intellectual humility.

Viewed through the lens of *Critical Interpretive Synthesis*, reform is also a hermeneutic process — an ongoing interpretation of Islamic principles within evolving historical and cultural conditions. This process requires a continuous dialogue between text and context, between inherited knowledge and lived experience. Reform-minded educators must practice *ijtihad tarbawi* (educational reasoning), interpreting classical concepts such as *'ilm*, *adab*, and *hikmah* in light of contemporary realities. This hermeneutic task ensures that Islamic education remains relevant, dynamic, and responsive to social change without sacrificing its ethical foundation. The teacher, in this framework, becomes a *mujtahid in education* — a reflective practitioner who connects the eternal truths of Islam to the temporal needs of learners.

Finally, the broader philosophical meaning of Islamic education reform lies in its contribution to global educational ethics. In an age when education worldwide is increasingly commodified and instrumental, Islamic reform introduces a counter-narrative — one that reclaims education as a moral covenant (*mithaq*) between teacher, learner, and God. The idea of teacher professionalism rooted in *akhlaq al-karimah* (noble character) offers a model of ethical modernity that transcends cultural boundaries. It demonstrates that excellence in education cannot be separated from virtue, and that professional competence without compassion leads to spiritual impoverishment. Thus, the reform of Islamic education in Western developing contexts does more than renew Muslim institutions; it enriches global discourse on what it means to educate human beings toward wisdom, justice, and mercy.

The findings of this study have conceptual implications for the development of teacher professionalism theory in the context of global Islamic education. Practically, the results of this study can serve as a reference for Islamic educational institutions in developing Western countries to design teacher training that integrates moral and spiritual values with modern pedagogical competencies. This approach can also enrich educational policy with a humanistic and dialogical Islamic ethical perspective.

However, this study has several limitations. First, because it is a literature review, the analysis relies on secondary data and therefore does not depict the deeper empirical dynamics related to the implementation of Islamic education reforms on the ground. Second, limited geographic representation causes the findings to focus on specific contexts such as Bosnia and South Africa, while other regions remain underrepresented. Therefore, the results of this synthesis need further testing through field research involving teachers, policymakers, and Islamic educational institutions in various socio-cultural contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

Islamic education reform in Western developing contexts represents a profound intellectual and spiritual movement aimed at restoring the moral purpose of education. Rather than imitating Western modernization or retreating into traditionalism, this reform reclaims the tawhidic unity of knowledge — where faith and reason coexist as complementary dimensions of human growth. The synthesis of literature demonstrates that reform functions as a moral reconstruction of education, calling for teachers who embody Islamic values while engaging effectively with the global educational landscape.

Teacher professionalism, in this context, transcends its conventional technical definition. It becomes an ethical and spiritual vocation founded on *ta'dib* (discipline of intellect and character), *ihsan* (excellence), and *amanah* (trust). The professional Muslim educator is envisioned as both a *murabbi* (nurturer of souls) and a reflective practitioner who mediates between tradition and modernity. Reform thus requires re-centering professionalism around moral consciousness — viewing the act of teaching as a sacred responsibility rather than a bureaucratic role.

The integration of faith-based ethics with modern educational principles creates a new model of integrative professionalism, aligning technical competence with moral and intercultural intelligence. Such a model positions Islamic education not as a counter-narrative to modern education but as its ethical corrective — a system that humanizes learning through spirituality and compassion. This conclusion affirms that true reform in Islamic education depends less on institutional structures and more on the transformation of teacher identity. In short, the renewal of Islamic education begins with the renewal of the educator: intellectually grounded, ethically firm, and spiritually enlightened. Further research is recommended to conduct empirical studies using qualitative and quantitative approaches to validate the conceptual framework of integrative professionalism proposed in this study.

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